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PSALM 149: AN INTERPRETATION.

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*Sing unto Yahweh a new song,
Praise him in the assembly of the godly.
Let Israel rejoice in her Creator,
Let the sons of Zion be joyful in their King!
Let them praise his name in the dance,
With tambourine and harp let them sing unto him.
For Yahweh has bestowed¹ mercy upon his people,
He crowned the meek with victory.
Let the godly exult in triumph,
Let them rejoice in their reward.²
Let there be high praises to God in their mouth,
And a two-edged sword in their hand:
To execute vengeance upon the heathen,
Punishments upon the nations;
To bind their kings with chains,
Their nobles with fetters of iron;
To execute upon them the judgment that stands written:
This glory have all the godly.*

THIS psalm is a prophetic hymn: in its form it is a hymn, but in its contents a prophecy. It follows the style of the most ancient hymns, beginning with a call to the congregation to praise God, and then stating the reason for the praise. This style may be seen in the song of Miriam,³

Sing to Yahweh, for high has he risen;
The horse and the chariot has he thrown into the sea.

Other examples of this form are given in Pss. 106:1; 33:1-4; 47:2 ff.; Isa. 44:23; 12:5.

Such words were originally meant to be spoken by the leader,

¹Read *rāsā*.

²Read *maskurtām*.

³Exod. 15:21.

who asks the choir to join with him in the praise of Yahweh.⁴ The manner of rendering the hymn may be discovered in the words of the psalm itself. It was sung by the assembled people gathered in the sanctuary, "the assembly of the godly," while the musical accompaniment was rendered by harps and tambourines; at the same time the people, with joy and exultation, performed a religious dance. In order to understand a psalm of this sort we must imagine the grand enthusiasm displayed at the popular religious festivals of the Hebrews.

The opening words of the hymn, "Sing unto Yahweh a new song," are a customary introduction.⁵ The original meaning of these words was that the old songs would suffice at ordinary occasions, but that now, since Yahweh has done a new deed, a new song has been prepared by the psalmist.

But while the form of the psalm is that of a ritual hymn, its contents differ widely from the usual hymns. For this song was not intended to be sung at the time when it was written, since it does not magnify the deeds of God which already had come to pass; rather, it was to be sung upon a future day, when God should fulfil his promises and grant his people a final victory over the heathen. The poet prepares in advance the hymn which the congregation is to sing when it may thank God for the great help bestowed upon it.

Thus we have here a curious combination of a hymn and a prophecy. But even this peculiar eschatological character of the hymn is typical, for quite a number of such hymns are to be found in the psalter.⁶ They are imitations of the eschatological poetic passages in the prophets. For the prophets, in order to add strength and fulness to their prophecies, adopted the style of hymns and clothed eschatological ideas with it.⁷ Such a psalm, therefore, presupposes the complete development of Hebrew literature.

⁴ See the interpretation of Ps. 103, in *BIBLICAL WORLD* for September, 1903, pp. 209-15.

⁵ Cf. Pss. 33:3; 96:1; Isa. 42:10.

⁶ Pss. 46, 47, 48, 82, 93, 97, 98, and others.

⁷ Cf. Isa., chap. 12; 25:1 ff.; 26:1 ff.; 42:10 ff.

The situation of this psalm is the great future festival of thanksgiving, when Israel will rejoice in her Creator and will exult over her king. Before the eyes of the whole world, by a mighty deed, Jehovah will then have proved himself to be the king of Israel who listens to the lamentations of his people, the Creator of Israel who does not forsake his creation.

With regard to its form this first strophe is a detailed introduction to the hymn. At the opening of the second strophe the reason for the praise is proclaimed. After a long period of wrath, when God hid his face, when he was wroth with Israel and had cast her away, he has now finally shown mercy unto his people. He has given victory to the sufferers; he has led them from the darkness of disgrace into the light of glory. The Jews, oppressed by foreign rulers, hope for a time when they themselves, the poor sufferers, shall conquer the heathen tyrants and inaugurate the empire of the universe. Then the godly shall exult and rejoice in their reward; true joy is theirs now, because they have at last received the reward which they deserved for their faithfulness toward Yahweh. Exulting in their God, they take up arms to conquer the world; they go forth to fight the battles of Yahweh, they praise God while they kill their enemies. It is a most impressive picture of a warlike theocracy, reminding us of the Maccabean heroes who "contended with their hands and prayed unto God with their hearts."⁸ English history also furnishes a parallel in Cromwell's army.

The third strophe continues to picture this conquest of the world by Israel. Hitherto the heathen have oppressed them, now the Jews take vengeance; hitherto the heathen wronged them, now the Jews bring punishment. It is very characteristic that Israel includes all "the heathen," every one of "the nations," in this war. Judaism is in conflict with the whole world; it believes it is maltreated by all peoples with whom it meets. As far as we know early Jewish history, we repeatedly see this condition of things: wherever the Jew comes, he is beaten and reviled; all nations are one in their hatred of the

⁸ 2 Macc. 15:27.

Jews. Therefore the downtrodden people cries for vengeance. It seeks solace in the hope that some day it will bind with chains the princes and the nobles who now oppress Israel sitting so proudly on their thrones. Then the sons of Israel will ascend the throne and punish the heathen as they have deserved; the poet probably means that judgment of death will then be passed upon the kings. For this he takes his argument from the Scripture; he is probably thinking of God's ordering Israel to exterminate the people of Canaan, or of a prophecy that predicts the coming vengeance of God on the heathen.⁹ Such is the glory that God bestows upon all the godly.

The psalm is instructive regarding the eschatological or messianic hope of Judaism. This hope is in large part of a political nature. It is the passionate longing of an oppressed people that cries for vengeance and that cannot forget its dream of world-rule. The religious element in the hope which here appears is only that, since Israel is not capable in her own power of achieving this world-rule, she asks God to assist her in vengeance upon the heathen and in the conquest of the world.

"By means of this psalm Gaspar Scioppius inflamed the Roman Catholic princes for the thirty years' religious war in his book *Classicum Belli Sacri*, a book which was not written with ink, but with blood. And within the Protestant church, by means of this psalm, Thomas Münzer stirred up the Peasants' War."¹⁰

⁹ Cf. Deut. 32:41.

¹⁰ See DELITZSCH, *Commentary on the Psalms*, in *loc.*